

## BOOKS

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## What's the Matter With American Fiction?

By FREDERIC TABER COOPER.

**F**ICTION and government have one thing in common: Every people and generation get approximately the kind that they deserve. So, when the question is asked—as to-day it is being asked rather insistently—"What is the matter with American fiction?" the



Sinclair Lewis—"Main Street" is neither the product of any modern school nor the foundation for a new one.

answer invites the counter question, "What is the matter with ourselves?" The novelist, regardless of the creed he practices, must draw his inspiration, in some measure, from the section of time and space in which he happens to live. To write a great novel requires genius plus maturity, but the genius must have matured in a nutritious soil.

It is no accidental paradox, but a sound canon of the craft, that the very factors which in this country

would do for this country what Dickens, Thackeray and Trollope did for England, and Balzac, unaided, did for France. The Great American Novel still remains a shimmering mirage; the American Balzac has never materialized. And the reason is simple: The great English and French masters of fiction had the advantage of a traditional, highly organized, finely stratified social structure. In a land where the social equilibrium is stable the novelist can give his whole attention unhindered to the interpretation of character and the development of plot—the two factors that, singly or together, make us remember a novel. For fiction is like chess, in that the interest lies in the intricate moves of the game and separate functions of the

politics, in business. The younger generation had come into its own; who cared how things used to be done? This was the day of new methods and of "speeding up." Writers were quick to catch the infection and formed their style from sign boards and advertising pages, with all their flare, exaggeration, compression and bad English. What matters a split infinitive or a floating participle, if you can save space? Grammar was invented by a stodgier age!

The result is that to-day American fiction finds itself in a precarious condition and in urgent need of being saved from ill-advised friends. We have a steadily augmenting group of younger novelists who have enjoyed a degree of critical acclaim

other, the manuscripts that bear the flaw of immaturity. Unfortunately, the reviewers, as well as the novelists, have caught the contagion of the prevailing restlessness, and hail a work as a masterpiece merely because it is *different*. The neglect of the old technique, the departure from established form, constitutes a badge of merit. Free verse is lauded above the sonnet or rondeau; and the novel which evades the traditional division into chapters is heralded as a stroke of genius.

In point of fact there is nothing in America to-day, either among the new writers or the old, that can be dignified by the name of anything like school of fiction. Out of the group which twenty years ago made the native movement a stimulating

because so completely unforeseen. "Main Street" is neither the product of any modern school nor the foundation for a new one. It is based upon sound, established technique, and, while its atmosphere is that of to-day, it traces a straight, unbroken pedigree back to the best conservative writers of an earlier



Joseph Hergesheimer—The climax of "Cytherea" is "one of those rare haunting pictures that read like a page out of a new Inferno."

generation. The opening paragraph taken alone suffices to give it distinction. Only once or twice in a decade does the professional reader know the joy of an initial page that sets before him in a single flash an indelible portrait, a sweeping background covering past, present and future, and an epitome of the book's theme: "A rebellious girl, the spirit of that bewildered empire called the American Middlewest."



John Dos Passos—"Three Soldiers" is "Zolaesque in its ambitious scope, its crowded, tumultuous detail."

No better example than this book could be taken of the right way, as contrasted with the wrong, to use contemporary American background and weave it into the fabric of the story, and yet keep it always subordinate to character and plot. "Main Street" is not primarily the story of a Western town, with Gopher Prairie filling the title role. It is the story of Carol Milford dreaming ambitious dreams and revolting against her en-



Scott Fitzgerald—His books are "a conspicuous example of the new tendency to follow the technique of the moving picture."

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pieces engaged; the chequered board, the background, while indispensable, is a fixed tradition.

Transition epochs, reconstruction periods have in all countries been unfruitful soil for fiction—which is one of the answers to the question at the head of this page. The swirl and turmoil of change are too new, too near to allow the writer to see clearly. After the war of 1870 France waited almost a generation for the epic sweep, the satisfying bigness of "La Débâcle." In America we had, before the civil war, "Uncle Tom's Cabin," based on the past stability of the world-old institution of slavery. But the reconstruction period brought forth no similarly significant novel of emancipation. The menace of intemperance has afforded a fertile theme for many a "L'Assommoir," but no writer of to-day seems in any haste to vindicate in fiction the dubious triumph of the Volstead law.

## III.

American novelists have always sensed the peril of the shifting background, and have taken refuge in the historic novel, like "The Scarlet Letter"—where distance of time steadies the perspective—or in the sectional novel of Boston or New Orleans or Friendship Village, each with a local code of its own. But since the world war local codes have crumbled and instability is rampant. The new ruling spirit is restlessness, which masquerades under the name of progress, and the only fixed habit is that of amending the Constitution. Change is the new intemperance, a contagious vice shared equally by pleasure seekers worshipping at the shrine of Jazz and the Blue Law bigots who would see indecency in the sex of a flower.

Even before the war certain influences were at work which bode ill for good technique. Life had increased its momentum, in society, in

and gratuitous publicity well nigh unparalleled in the history of letters. And side by side with this overlavish praise is now heard a mounting voice of protest, the sincere questioning of a sane minority, whether there be any lasting merit in the new movement—so far as it is a movement.

Looking at the whole question impartially one must recognize the new generation has produced a few writers of real promise, some of whom have in varying degrees already produced volumes entitled to a serious



Zona Gale—"Miss Lulu Bett" is used by to-day's critics and columnists as a convenient standard of measurement.

hearing, however ephemeral they may prove to be. Scott Fitzgerald, Sherwood Anderson, Charles D. Norris, Floyd Dell, John Dos Passos, one and all have interesting possibilities; they severally possess in some measure the qualities for which they have been widely and immoderately praised. The danger is that they are likely to be lured along false paths that may delay the achievement of the best that lies in them. What every young writer most needs is some mentor to do him the service that Flaubert did for Maupassant and ruthlessly destroy, one after an-

study the majority have followed Frank Norris into silence, and those who survive have in later years chosen steadily diverging paths. And as for the newer writers who have sprung up within the last few years, from Sinclair Lewis to Stephen Vincent Benet, the only thing they have in common is their independence, their habit of working out their own thoughts in their own way. All of which, however commendable when sanely controlled, has never yet laid the foundations of a school. Still less can a similarity of theme and material constitute a literary movement. You can no more make a cabaret-and-cocktail school of fiction out of Owen Johnson's "Salamander," Hergesheimer's "Cytherea" and Scott Fitzgerald's "Beautiful and Damned" than you can make an animal school out of "Aesop's Fables," "Black Beauty" and "Wild Animals I Have Known."

To be specific, what is really the matter with the younger generation may be summed up under three general heads: They have not troubled themselves to learn the technique of their art; they have set themselves up to preach, forgetting that while every big novel must have a message the novelist must be first a novelist, and keep his message subordinate, and, thirdly, too many of them handle the unclean word, not with the healthy directness of a surgeon at a clinic but with a surface assumption of blasé weariness, masking the prurient curiosity of youth.

## V.

As with all generalizations, there are conspicuous exceptions to this indictment, and a notable one is furnished by Sinclair Lewis. Because of an intense impression gathered from private comment the present writer believed for eighteen months the reading of "Main Street"—and then read it with pleasure all the time.



Sherwood Anderson—"At best he has the grimness of Poe and Baudelaire without their breadth of human understanding."

have given the novelist his unique opportunities—its youth, its bigness, its boundless ambitions—have at the same time constituted his heaviest handicap, a shifting, unstable social background.

## II.

There were high hopes nurtured in the past of The Great American Novel yet to come; brave talk of a native Human Comedy, vast, vital, all inclusive, by some stalwart group, or single handed colossus, who



Floyd Dell: "There are elements of real bigness in 'The Briary Bush,' a book of unabashed frankness."